Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone.

We have a one-year/renewable approach to membership at Blue Ocean Faith. Today new series that also functions as orientation to membership. Your invitation to walk with us as members in 2018. If you get weekly update, receive our membership booklet, which is also on welcome table. [Membership Letters]

BOF in less than 70 words: We’re unapologetically into God as God can be experienced through Jesus—who offers a new kind of belonging. We also believe adults should be treated like adults—so we don’t presume to tell you what to believe or how to think. Our culture is invitational and exploratory. Try it out, see how it works. Your questions, doubts, and “I-can’t-buy-that” selves are welcome here. We think God is about connections more than answers.

Brené Brown’s new book is our companion for this series. Brown is a researcher at University of Houston—her TED talk on Vulnerability is most watched TED talk.

Title says it all: Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone. We need to belong to a community, but important not to lose ourselves in our belonging.

But first, give Tim Kowaleski some time to tell his story.

True belonging requires that we: 1 Set and respect boundaries; 2. Practice vulnerability—bring our whole selves (including our differences) into connection. 3. Are willing to stand alone. All three require some nerve-courage. Courage forged under pressure.

That led her to ask: how do people find connection with others while at the same time, having the courage to be true to themselves when they differ from group? She thinks many of us are grappling with that challenge. Brene Brown says the “wilderness” is where we work that out. Brown describes 4 required practices that we learn in the wilderness—let me just read them to give you a flavor. [Read chapter titles] I hope I’ve whet your appetite.
Today explore: **what the wilderness experience is about.**

I want to use the experience of Jesus being sent by the Spirit into the wilderness at the start of his public ministry to describe what happens to many of us—has happened to many of you.

There’s always a set of **particulars**, unique for each of us, but there are also **patterns** that emerge from the particulars. Jesus had his particulars, but the patterns that emerge can resonate widely.

Before Jesus was a SuperStar he visits John the Baptist leading a spiritual uprising in Judean desert—one that appeals especially to the poor, disaffected, religious outsiders. Jesus presents himself to be baptized by John (symbolic gesture John performs to convey his message that God is near, turn to be embraced by God!)

In the water, Jesus has a powerful Spirit experience (you are my beloved son, in whom my soul delights). Emotion gist is **“I’m right here with you. I like you. We can do this!”**

**Super-important:** experiencing God in this way—a God with us, for us, who likes us, gives us the courage needed for belonging; to set/respect boundaries, courage to be vulnerable (bring our whole selves into connection) and courage to stand alone as needed.

After this, Jesus is sent by Spirit into wilderness for 40 days. Recorded in 3 gospels (Mt, Lk, Mk). Mark gives shortest version: **“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilder-ness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”**

I like Mark’s blunt version. Luke says **“The Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness”** (Precious Lord, take my hand) Mark says **“The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness”—**In my experience that’s truer to a wilderness experience. The wilderness is not a cushy retreat center. A cascade of unexpected events sweeps
over us, like a Hurricane (without benefit of weather channel warnings) and we look around and say: “What happened!?”

Think of the wilderness as an unplanned/unanticipated and disorienting shift in circumstances or emotional surroundings. [For many, election brought a big shift in emotional surroundings]

A wilderness is a place that appears barren at first. The resources seem hidden: where’s the water faucet, where’s the thermostat to adjust the heat, where do I plug in my electric toothbrush?

Emily and I lost our jobs a few years back. We felt driven by the Spirit more than led by Spirit. Our first response? Where is everything? All we see is wild beasts with their creepy glow-stick eyes at night. And then, eventually, the hidden resources manifest, like messengers from God. (Many of you, for example saying, “We can do this—plant a church out here. Could be fun!”)

**Common events that drive us into a wilderness experience:**

**Loss of a spouse** (through death or divorce)—disrupts all sorts of thing you didn’t expect, often find that your social network was organized around being a couple...finances shift, often have to sell house, people around you have their own grief....Oddly enough, marriage and certainly remarriage can also trigger same thing.

**Geographic displacement**...move to a new city and all the daily habits, automatic routes, relational network disrupted...you go from being pretty well known to being the new kid on block.

**Big job change**...or a stretch of unemployment.
A life-altering medical event/diagnosis....
Personally affected by grinding forces like racism, sexism.

**Or what our Serendipitydodah momma bears have been thru.** You’re in a cozy church that works for you and one day your teenager tells you he’s gay or your
daughter says, “Mom, I feel like a boy inside.” You sense the Spirit standing with them, so you do the same. But then your cozy faith community meets your love with accusation—or the silent withdrawal that is even worse.

**Jesus’ wilderness period bookended by personal disruptions:**

He moved away from Nazareth, a tiny village...eventually o Capernaum, a bustling commercial center. Gospels indicate his family was upset by this move--tried to bring him back forcibly.

Add to that: enormous new pressure as his mentor-cousin John the Baptist, leading this big movement, is arrested, throwing the movement into disarray and now lots of people looking to Jesus since John had given Jesus his endorsement.

Prior to wilderness our sense of self is settled in its familiar place. For decades when they ask, ‘Are you at same address, same insurance? I’d say, “Yep, yep, for years—boring as Post Office, thank God. That changes in the wilderness of sudden disruption.

In the wilderness you find yourself baffled at first—needing to sort through disparate/disjointed voices/experiences. Your identity and your place in a wider community is tested/renegotiated.

**Jesus was sorting through different voices in wilderness:**

**Voice of Accusation** [Hebrew word for accuser is ha ‘satan]—a voice Jesus struggled to discern and fend off in the wilderness.

**Voice of the Spirit** with an entirely different tone/message: “I’m right here with you. I like you. Let’s do things together.”

We all know the voice of accusation in our heads. If we’re leaving one social network and people are displeased there will be plenty of lingering voices of accusation rattling around in our heads. If we are differentiating from our peeps
over something, struggling to find the courage to stand alone, that fear may manifest as a voice of accusation. You are being disloyal, “how could you do this?”

If you become an ally to someone who is subject to accusation from others, you will yourself become subject to that accusation.

**Voices of accusation can paralyze and control us for years.**

The power to resist voices of accusation comes from the Spirit. Remember Spirit of Jesus is called Paraclete, defender of the accused. Jesus had a taste of Spirit at moment of baptism: “You are my beloved son in whom my soul delights” A.K.A. I’m with you. I like you. We’ve got things to do together.

At first all those voices are just a *cacophonous-chaotic muddy noise machine*—until you do the wilderness work of distinguishing & sorting voices, and with the help of the Spirit, find your own....

I did this exercise on a retreat that was very instructive. They said, take an hour walk: for the first ten minutes tune into the sights, notice things visually, then tune in to the sense of touch—feel the heat of the sun on your skin, feel the breeze, touch the trees, then tune into the smells for 10 minutes, then the sounds. Instructive part of doing that is you realize that you can single out on sense and focus on it, and it amplifies. Fascinating.

In the wilderness, something like that is going on. Here’s how I imagine it unfolding for Jesus. At first, he’s surrounded by a muddy feeling of accusation. Beatles: “She’s leaving home, by-bye...”

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She (We gave her most of our lives)
Is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives)
Home (We gave her everything money could buy)
She's leaving home after living alone
For so many years
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Imagine being that daughter finally leaving home!
When you are surrounded by muddy voices of accusation—vague feelings—it’s much harder to resist. To **resist** you have to **assess**.
Assess (where is this muddy-vague feeling coming from) and resist.

In the wilderness, whatever those muddy-indistinct-vague feeling voices of accusation were for Jesus, they eventually crystallized into words. “If you are the son of God, do some tricks for me...”

Then Jesus could **asses & resist**. Oh! No! Get behind me!

In the wilderness Jesus learns to differentiate the voice of the Spirit from the voices of accusation. Because the voice of accusation presents itself as the voice God—like a Baptist preacher after too much coffee quoting Scripture like a machine gun.
[That’s how Satan was talking to Jesus in wilderness]

Voice of the Spirit: *I’m here. I like you. We can do this!*” has an entirely different feel from that whining-insistent accusing voice.

**Jesus came out of the wilderness with new clarity.**
He had confidence in his own voice and message.
(We don’t actually hear a word from Jesus in his own voice until this time.)

**He was self-defined.** He could disagree with his elders. But he could also stay connected. He was up for forming new relationships with a new group of people—he moved to Capernaum, got to know Peter, Andres, etc.

He was on his way.

**QUIET REFLECTION**

First, identify a time in your life or a time in your life when you had to battle through voices of accusation in your head. How lonely-confusing that was.
Then, once you’ve done that....

Imagine if you can, a God whose voice had an entirely different emotional tone than that: I’ve suggested the emotional tone of the Spirit is captured in words: I’m with you. I like you. We can do this. Use those words if they help.

In a playful way imagine how a God like this might communicate that to you, in a way that fit you. If God appeared as a character—what might this God be like (Movie The Shack: black woman/strong mother type. Assign Gender of your choosing.)

Maybe God would have an arm around your shoulder.  
Maybe God would be your perfect counselor-therapist person.

Maybe for you.... God is just with you enjoying something you enjoy doing, but now you’re doing it together with him.  
(Fishing, playing golf, doing dishes, sitting together at concert.)